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STAT
The Man
Who Kept The Secrets

FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM Panorama

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SUBJECT The CIA

RON NESSEN: We have set aside a long portion of our program today to talk about the Central Intelligence Agency with three men who know a great deal about the CIA. They are Thomas Powers, who has written a new book about the CIA called "The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA," tracing the organization and Helms' role in it all the way back to its beginning. David Ignatius, who is with The Wall Street Journal and writes frequently on intelligence matters. Morton Halperin, who was a member of the National Security Council. And I suppose we would have to describe you now, Mort, as a critic of the CIA.

I wanted to begin -- we have so many things to talk about -- but to begin with, just briefly, this assassination of -- what apparently was a plot against President Park Chung Hee in Korea. And it was the Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency who pulled the trigger. That is something that our CIA has never done, or at least has never done as far as we know, assassinated one of our own Presidents.

Do you see any sign, any of you, that our CIA was involved in the Park assassination?

DAVID IGNATIUS: Not to -- I think today too many forms would have to be signed to...

NESSEN: [Laughter]

IGNATIUS: ...to execute it with that speed. I think that's remote, personally.

NESSEN: Tom, do you...

THOMAS POWERS: I would agree with that. It wouldn't seem likely to me at all. It's not too unusual for an intelligence agency to become an integral part of its nation's politics in that kind of way. You know, in Russia they have since the Revolution shot three leaders of the secret police. That's in a space of 60-odd years. That indicates that they were obviously at the very heart of political life. So that doesn't surprise me.

But it would surprise me if we had been involved.

NESSEN: How about with a wink, though? I mean the Diem assassination in South Vietnam was done, perhaps, with a wink from the United States, that we wouldn't be terribly unhappy if he were killed. Could anything like that have happened in Korea?

Mort, you look so thoughtful.

MORTON HALPERIN: Well, I mean, I think that the possibility that the United States and the CIA were involved or could be involved in a situation where they urge the military or the CIA or secret police in a country to overthrow the current leadership is, I think, not remote. It happened many times in the past, and I think could happen again now. I doubt whether they would urge that it be done by this kind of simple assassination.

And I don't think in this case they were involved because I don't think it is in the interests of the United States Government that the President of Korea was killed. I don't...

NESSEN: And to bring on a period of uncertainty.

HALPERIN: Yes. And it's not clear what the policies of the new government will be and how they relate to our policies.

So, my doubt about it has to do with just not thinking it's something that the Carter Administration thinks is in its interests, rather than thinking that the CIA is at the point where it can't carry this out. I think it can -- there would be more pieces of paper to sign, but I think few enough that they could, in fact, do it and get away with it if they felt it was in their interests to do...

NESSEN: Well, I suppose the single thing that has brought about the most criticism of the CIA in recent years has been the revelation that the CIA was involved, to some extent, at least, in some plots to assassinate leaders of foreign countries. And I was there when President Ford expressed his incredulity that this had happened at a private lunch with The New York Times; and that sort of set off this long period of several

years.

Is it ever justified for American intelligence to assassinate a foreign leader?

POWERS: Well, yes. In 1933 if the man is Hitler, and we're looking back on it from the vantage point of 30 years. But when you're looking forward in a situation like that, how would you possibly know that you were going to be gaining anything by assassinating somebody else?

You know, we live in a country that's been through this. We've had our...

NESSEN: The assassination of our own leadership.

POWERS: Yes. And the reason that assassination has a special name is because it's not just like any other kind of a crime. It has a devastating effect on the people involved. And I don't think a nation ever really has the right to do that to some other country. Possibly you could justify it right in the time of war. But in time of peacetime, to just unilaterally decide, a bunch of guys in the White House, "So-and-so has to be done away with. Patrice Lumumba. He's too charismatic. We can't get anything done in the Congo if this guy is still around," I don't see how you could ever morally justify that.

NESSEN: Anybody disagree that it can never morally be justified, whatever the strategic advantages of it might be?

HALPERIN: I think that's clear. I think it's also true that you do not want, in my view, in a democracy, to have an intelligence service which is not bound by a set of rules which restricts very clearly what it can and cannot do. And in my view, assassination is an easy question. I would put far more restrictions on the CIA than prohibiting assassinations.

NESSEN: Well, the investigation by the Church Committee of the CIA after the revelation that it had been involved in plots to assassinate finally concluded that there wasn't any very strong evidence that any foreign leader had been assassinated. The strongest evidence was Patrice Lumumba assassinated with the knowledge of or order by President Eisenhower. But all the others, there was some real question about whether the CIA was involved.

POWERS: Involved? I'm not sure about that. There's no question the CIA was involved in plots to kill Castro. The question...

NESSEN: Well, I was going to come to the Castro in a moment, yes.

POWERS: ...that it was involved in other plots which actually resulted in the deaths of foreign leaders.

NESSEN: That's what I mean, that no foreign leaders were killed.

POWERS: Well, sometimes they were killed and some...

NESSEN: But not as a direct result of...

POWERS: Well, that's not absolutely clear.

HALPERIN: It depends on how direct you think direct -- I think the problem is, as Mr. Powers really shows in his book, the people who did that study were lawyers, and they really asked the question of "Is there enough evidence for us to convict either a President of the United States or the CIA of actually -- not attempted murder, but actual murder of somebody?" And they concluded that probably there wasn't enough evidence for that.

One would not expect a secret intelligence service to leave behind sufficient evidence that they could be convicted in a court of law.

NESSEN: To go into a court of law.

HALPERIN: Well, but if you ask the question not as a lawyer or a judge, but in terms of reasonable inferences from reasonable evidence, then I think it's clear the CIA was involved in a number of assassination plots. And I don't have any doubt, as Mr. Powers doesn't, that the President of the United States knew about it and ordered it.

IGNATIUS: But that's an especially important point, I think. And one of the real lessons of Tom's book is that when there were CIA assassination attempts, as near as one can tell years afterward, this was done either on the orders of U.S. Presidents or with their knowledge.

So this notion that we have a spy service that goes around bumping people off on its own hook I think has been pretty well shattered by what Tom...

NESSEN: The rogue elephant theory, you don't believe in.

Tom mentioned the Castro assassination, multiple plots, longest-running continuous assassination plot we had. I think if Jimmy Breslin wrote about that, he'd probably have to call it "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight."

But it has led to another persistent rumor in Washington,

that the CIA was somehow involved in the assassination of John Kennedy, either by carrying it out itself, or as a retaliation by Castro for all these CIA plots. And that is a rumor that won't die.

And you must have come across its trail in your research.

POWERS: Well, not just its trail. I mean there are thousands of people out there tramping through the wilderness, looking for the evidence to prove some such relationship. This is one of the most widely held beliefs among the general public, really, that somehow the CIA was mixed up in killing John F. Kennedy.

I think that is really ridiculous, and I don't think there's any evidence for it. I can't understand why in the world they would want to have done it. All the arguments ascribing motives to the CIA are factually incorrect and are based upon an alleged threat by Kennedy to destroy the agency, which was never made and was in no danger of being carried out. There's no question that John F. Kennedy was killed at a time when he and his brother were probably more enthusiastic about what you could do with the CIA than they'd ever been before.

NESSEN: Well, I have to tell you that President Ford, who was on the Warren Commission, was interested enough to at least look into this sort of "Tears of Autumn" theory, which a former CIA agent wrote as a novel, which in the novel form it was that the Diem family had retaliated for his assassination by having Kennedy assassinated. The rumor, of course, is that Castro had Kennedy assassinated in retaliation.

HALPERIN: But I think that's part of the reason why it's clear that one ought to stay away from assassinations. Once you start assassinating people, or trying to, there is a danger that they will try to retaliate. But even more, there's no way to prove, ever, the negative of these rumors.

NESSEN: How about the character assassination, and, again, the persistent rumor that the CIA somehow brought down Richard Nixon, deliberately bungled the Watergate break-in and sort of moved the pieces around.

HALPERIN: That, I think, is absolute nonsense. I think what the CIA did do, and which Mr. Powers, in his book, if you do what he suggests in his footnotes, you have to do about other books -- namely, read them very carefully -- makes it very clear that Richard Helms had the power to bring down Richard Nixon, and decided not to do so. That he knew all he had to do was stand up the day after the Watergate burglary and say, "We helped Mr. Hunt on some domestic enterprises for

the CIA," which is mentioned in the book; say something which is not mentioned in the book, namely, that the false identification papers that the CIA agent had came from the CIA. And third -- that the Watergate burglars had came from the CIA. And third, that the CIA had in its possession photographs of a burglary that Hunt and Liddy had committed in California.

If that had been said by the CIA the day after the burglary, or just given to the FBI, which was, in fact, conducting an honest, straightforward investigation, I don't think Richard Nixon would have been reelected.

NESSEN: So -- and Helms deliberately decided not to do that.

HALPERIN: Helms, personally, specifically, continuously, ordered other officials of the CIA not to turn that information over to the FBI.

NESSEN: We want to come back and discuss whether the Russians have planted an agent high up in the CIA, a mole. We'll talk about that when we continue this interesting discussion on Panorama.

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NESSEN: We're talking about the CIA with three experts on the CIA: Thomas Powers, who has written a new book about it, and a very good book about it, called "The Man Who Kept the Secrets"; David Ignatius, who writes about intelligence matters for The Wall Street Journal; and Morton Halperin, formerly of the National Security Council and a critic of the CIA.

The mole. That's a story that will not go away in Washington, that decades ago somebody was recruited by Soviet intelligence. He has worked his way to the very highest levels of the Central Intelligence Agency and is now secretly betraying his country.

Do you, any or all of you, believe that there is such a person?

POWERS: I think the first thing you have to say about that is that it could be true. Things like that do happen. Intelligence services do put agents right up at the very top of other people's governments sometimes. And they stay there for a long time and they really betray a lot of important secrets. So it's not impossible; it's not silly. It could have happened.

NESSEN: Kim Philby is a perfect example.

HALPERIN: The strongest evidence against it is the Penkovsky story. That is, if they had a mole high up, very high in the agency, they would have started to get word that the Penkovsky materials -- the one high agent we had in the Soviet Union was passing that stuff.

NESSEN: He would have been betrayed.

HALPERIN: He would obviously have a problem.

But given how difficult it is to operate as a spy for us high in the Soviet Union, they could have contrived a way much sooner to discover him. And my impression, which again is confirmed by the book, of the high quality of the material that he gave us for such a long period of time -- again...

POWERS: He was finally betrayed, though.

HALPERIN: Well, yeah. But as you suggest in the book, there was too much good stuff for it to be a plot, for Penkovsky to be a...

POWERS: I think that's...

HALPERIN: But if it's too much good stuff for it to be a plot, then it's equally true that it's too much good stuff for them to have known about it all this time, through a mole, and not done something to cut it off. So I think it's...

POWERS: But those things are very tightly held within an intelligence service. You wouldn't necessarily know who Penkovsky was or where the stuff was coming from or...

HALPERIN: But you'd know it was coming. I mean you would have a hint of it. I was in the Pentagon during some of that time, and I did not have a clearance and did not know he existed, but you got a sense from the people in the agency that they were speaking with some greater confidence about things...

POWERS: There was something behind the winks?

HALPERIN: Yeah. And, of course, you never know whether there's something behind it. But if I was the mole, I would have sent back a cable at that point saying, "There's something new going on here, and you'd better start checking into it."

NESSEN: Were you the mole?

HALPERIN: I am not now nor have I ever been the mole.

NESSEN: The most amazing development in the great mole

chase, I think, was that Bill Colby, a former Director of the CIA, was moved to write in The Washington Star, "I am not a mole."

IGNATIUS: The mole stuff, I think, is driving people in the agency nearly as crazy as it drives journalists and others who try to inquire into it. And the reason for that is that, by its very nature, this sort of secret penetration can be impossible ever to fully uncover.

There are a whole series of people that we could cite here who've come under suspicion as having played this role over several decades. And in each instance, so far as I know, the CIA and the FBI have never been able to reach a final definitive conclusion about what the facts are. And that's why all this is so maddening. Helms has described it as his greatest nightmare while he was CIA Director. And I think it's because you never get to the bottom of it.

HALPERIN: But I must say, I think that the importance of it is greatly exaggerated. It's dependent on the view that there are real secrets at the center of the CIA which, if the Russians discovered, they could do something with. And I think -- with the sole exception of Penkovsky -- they could have gotten rid of him -- that that just isn't true. Most of the covert operations we engage in are not a secret. The Russians know all about them. They don't need a mole to know we're trying to overthrow the government of Guatemala or that we're running around now in Africa trying to do something about the Cubans. You don't need a mole to know that we have satellite photography and that it's pretty good, and things of that kind.

I think most of what the CIA does is analysis of a kind that really isn't anywhere near as secret.

So I would say they should relax, stop worrying about it, get on to what they ought to be doing, which is trying to produce good intelligence...

NESSEN: I want to talk to you about getting on with it and this idea of sort of technical intelligence versus the old-fashioned cloak-and-dagger kind of intelligence.

I guess one of the criticisms of Stansfield Turner, the current CIA Director, is -- aside from the fact that he fired a lot of people at sort of a middle level, and also a lot of people who had been around from the beginning -- is that he relies, in the view of his critics, too much on satellites and technical intelligence, and less -- and not enough on the old-fashioned spy.

POWERS: It's hard to recruit spies, though. You can

spend an awful lot of time on it. They've been arguing...

NESSEN: They've run classified ads recently looking for spies.

HALPERIN: Those are...

POWERS: That might work.

HALPERIN: I think they're both wrong. I think that the emphasis ought to be on the analysis of information, and that the agency's fallen down. And I think, indeed, that Helms' greatest failure is that he wasn't an analyst. He didn't believe in it, really, and didn't understand what it was about.

NESSEN: Is Iran the greatest example of the failure to properly analyze intelligence information?

POWERS: I wouldn't think so. I mean there are so many, it's hard to know which would be...

NESSEN: Recently?

POWERS: But that's a failure, I think, that's been laid at their door somewhat unfairly. It's very difficult to spy on your friends. You can spy on your enemies, to some extent. They expect it. And you can go at it with eagerness and enthusiasm and real effort. But when you try and spy on a friend, a client, he immediately is going to know there's something going on in his country, and he will come back a high level and say, "Hey, what is this? We're supposed to be friends. Why have you got all these operations going on inside my country?"

HALPERIN: But I think the point about Iran is -- actually, Carter said in a press conference when asked about it -- we didn't have to spy on them to know the Shah was in trouble. You just had to look around. And foreign visitors who -- Americans who went to Iran came back saying the Shah was in trouble. Every Iranian expert in the United States, including, as far as I could tell, those in the CIA, said the Shah is in much more trouble than the American Government thinks.

It isn't a question of spies, or even of technical intelligence. It was a question that people didn't want to see what I think the reality was.

NESSEN: Well, to the extent that the CIA defends itself in the Iranian case, Vietnam, and other examples of what have been sort of commonly called CIA failures, the CIA argument is that they knew what was going on and they reported what was going on, but it was the political people who ignored, misused, changed, or otherwise didn't pay attention to the information they were get-

getting.

POWERS: This certainly isn't the first time this has happened to us, though. I think it's a kind of a temperamental thing on the part of a guy who's an ambassador, and he's in a high position in a country and he moves in select circles, and from time to time he crosses some gigantic marble floor, with his heels clicking, and there's the Shah sitting on the Peacock Throne and there's a lot of generals around him. And it looks pretty stable and secure. It's difficult to feel the ground-swell of popular sovereignty beneath your feet when you're strictly in the palace.

NESSEN: How graphically put.

I want to come back to something Mort said much earlier, and that has to do, really, with a much broader and kind of philosophical question of the role of an intelligence agency.

Is it only to gather intelligence, or is it to gather and analyze intelligence? Or is there a proper role for covert operations, to attempt to carry out America's interests and policies covertly?

POWERS: I think that there'd be little dispute among senior ex-CIA people, like Dick Helms, today that it's a good thing for the CIA that the heyday of covert action, running secret armies, organizing coups, are over. If there was anything that Helms seems to have stood for, it was this notion that an intelligence agency gathers intelligence. When it runs around playing god in the third world, it gets in trouble and doesn't do its mission.

So, it seems to me that the consensus of intelligence experts would be, "Let's stay pretty clear of covert action." That leads a lot of other, scarier questionable activities they might engage in than simple intelligence-gathering.

NESSEN: Mort, you're less sanguine about...

HALPERIN: I mean my sense is that we've passed the peak of restrictions on the agency; and that given this Administration's anti-Russian mood, given the frustration about how to deal with the Cubans, I think the curve is going to go up again.

NESSEN: The curve of covert operations.

HALPERIN: Of covert operations. In 10 years from now, when we get the next history of the CIA, it will say that the finding of the Russian troops in Cuba was a turning point, and that we started back in the covert operations business again.

I think we need legislation from the Congress that if it doesn't prohibit covert operations, which would be my preference, very strictly restricts them. Get the CIA back in the business which I think it ought to be in, which is not the Helms view that they ought to be running spies primarily, but that it ought to be doing good analysis and bringing that forcefully to the attention of the President.

NESSEN: Fascinating, much more so than anything Graham Greene or John Le Carre has written. Thomas Powers' book about the CIA is "The Man Who Kept Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA."

Thank you, gentlemen.

Incidentally, I noticed that so many of the reviews didn't review the book. They were very emotional reviews of the CIA, pro or con.

But anyhow, it is a fascinating book, and a fascinating discussion.